

THE CONTROVERSY OVER THE LINGUISTIC MODEL OF THE CATALAN EDUCATION SYSTEM: ARGUMENTS, THEIR NORMATIVE BASES AND PROSPECTS FOR RAPPROCHEMENT

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Abstract

The linguistic conjunction regime in the Catalan education system has been subject to several controversies over the years and we can see one position in favour and another against the model. In this article we identify the main arguments in the public debate for and against the system and analyse its normative basis in accordance with contributions of political theory on linguistic justice. Ultimately, our goal is to assess to which extent there is room for rapprochement or reconciliation between the arguments of the two positions. Our main argument is that both positions, which have employed fairly stable reasoning over time with a shared tendency to avoid explicit identity arguments, may have a certain margin for rapprochement. Some interpretations of the values that underline the arguments of both position, such as ideals of equal treatment of languages, equality of individual opportunities and the guarantee of pluralism, could support a linguistic conjunction system of in schools in which Catalan has a prominent role, Spanish enjoys sufficient recognition, and equal competence in both languages is guaranteed at the end of the school period.

Key words: linguistic conjunction; Catalan; discourse; debate; linguistic justice; normative political theory.

LA CONTROVÈRSIA SOBRE EL MODEL LINGÜÍSTIC DEL SISTEMA EDUCATIU CATALÀ: ARGUMENTS, FONAMENTS NORMATIUS I PERSPECTIVES D'APROPAMENT

Abstract

El règim de conjunció lingüística al sistema educatiu català ha estat motiu de diverses controvèrsies al llarg dels anys que permeten constatar una posició a favor i una altra en contra del model. En aquest article, identifiquem els principals arguments a favor i en contra del sistema en el debat públic i n'analitzem els fonaments normatius d'acord amb les aportacions de la teoria política sobre justícia lingüística. En darrer terme, el nostre objectiu és avaluar fins a quin punt hi ha marge per a l'apropament o la reconciliació entre els arguments de les dues posicions. El nostre argument principal és que les dues posicions, que han emprat raonaments força estables al llarg del temps amb una tendència compartida a evitar arguments explícitament d'identitat, poden tenir cert marge d'apropament. Algunes interpretacions dels valors que fonamenten els arguments d'ambdues posicions, com els ideals de tracte igual de llengües, la igualtat d'oportunitats individuals o la garantia del pluralisme, podrien sostenir un sistema lingüístic de conjunció lingüística a l'escola en què el català tingués un paper prominent, el castellà gaudís d'un reconeixement suficient i es garantís una competència igual en ambdues llengües en finalitzar el període escolar.

Paraules clau: conjunció lingüística; català; discurs; debat; justícia lingüística; teoria política normativa.

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The Catalan education model and, in particular, the linguistic conjunction regime has been subject to several controversies over the years. Despite being born out of widespread consensus among the various political groups in the Parliament of Catalonia at the time of its creation, arguments and conflicts have arisen concerning it, to the point that it is now one of the most sensitive political issues on the Catalan political agenda.

In this paper we examine these controversies or points of conflict concerning the Catalan linguistic conjunction education model. We specifically want to clarify the main arguments for and against the system and the compatibilities and incompatibilities between the various positions and the arguments for them. Our ultimate objective is to assess the extent to which there are dimensions of the controversy that are unresolvable and, therefore, that it would be desirable to avoid, and to what extent there are others that may be compatible and reconcilable.¹ Our main argument is that some interpretations of the values underpinning the arguments of both positions could support a linguistic conjunction system in schools in which Catalan has a prominent role, Spanish enjoys sufficient recognition, and equal competence in both languages is guaranteed at the end of the school period.

We will proceed as follows. Firstly, we will use the field of linguistic justice as a theoretical framework to study the controversy. An important distinction will be made between linguistic justice theorists who argue that languages have only an instrumental value and those who argue that they have both an instrumental and an identity value. Secondly, by adapting the fieldwork performed by Cetrà (2019), we will identify the main arguments put forward by the different political actors involved. We will see that both positions are internally plural, but that they share a growing tendency to avoid explicit arguments regarding identity. Finally, on the basis of the prior analysis, we will compare the two sets of arguments and try to assess the extent to which they are compatible or may be reconciled.

1 The value of languages: linguistic justice, instrumentalism and identity

In this section we provide the theoretical framework for the paper by studying linguistic justice, one of the many political phenomena studied in normative political theory. Language justice theories deal with the moral principles or standards that should guide the management of linguistic diversity.² What are the principles for linguistic coexistence? How should the costs and benefits of living in society be managed in relation to language diversity? For example, should we live in societies that treat all of the languages that coexist in them equally? Is unequal treatment of languages by institutions justified? And, if so, when and under what conditions?

These questions lead us first to ask ourselves what value does the thing we want to regulate —languages— have? Why are they important to people and society? Here the discipline is divided into two general points of view: those who argue that languages have a purely instrumental value and those who argue that they have not only instrumental value but also identity value.³

1 In this paper we have no intention of making proposals for improving the Catalan education and linguistic model; we simply wish to verify what the positions are, analyse them and see whether or not they would be compatible to some extent. We are also not naive regarding the likelihood of reaching consensus in a long-standing controversy in which motivations are not always based on principles but instead on interests and identity. However, we believe that this is a positive exercise to identify possible ways for discursive rapprochement and, also, renewal of arguments.

2 Broadly speaking, normative political theory has to do with the norms that should guide our common life and what would be desirable, permissible or required (or not) from a moral perspective. This includes, of course, the analysis of concepts and arguments. Discussing what principles would be desirable to guide a decent or fair society obliges us to analyse concepts and arguments that justify these principles. For further examination, see Rawls (2008), Requejo & Gonzalo (2009) or Miller (2011).

3 For a more detailed summary of these debates see Riera-Gil (2016) and Morales-Gálvez & Riera-Gil (2019) and, in English, Patten & Kymlicka (2003), De Schutter (2007), Robichaud & De Schutter (2012), De Schutter & Robichaud (2015) and Alcalde (2018). For complete linguistic justice theories, see the monographs by Van Parijs (2011) and Patten (2014). Finally, for compendiums of articles on the subject, see Kymlicka & Patten (2003), Ricento, Peled & Ives (2015) and, more recently, Peled & Weinstock (2020).

Table 1. Main positions and arguments concerning the value of languages

The position that languages have exclusively instrumental value	The position that languages have instrumental value (including the above) and identity value
Ensuring effective communication between individuals (Barry, 2001; Weinstock, 2003)	Promoting the value of autonomy (Kymlicka, 1995; Patten, 2014)
Ensuring equal socioeconomic opportunities between individuals (Barry, 2001; Pogge, 2003; Patten, 2014)	Ensuring the value of dignity or respect (Van Parijs, 2011; Schutter, 2014)
Promoting efficiency (Grin 2006)	
Ensuring mobility within the political community (Barry, 2001; Pogge, 2003; Van Parijs, 2011)	
Enhancing social cohesion through mutual understanding between individuals (Miller, 1995; Van Parijs, 2011)	

Defenders of the purely instrumental value of language (Barry, 2001; Pogge, 2003; Weinstock, 2003) argue that when deciding which regulatory rules should be established concerning linguistic diversity, only the instrumental dimension of language, linked to five powerful ideas, needs to be taken into account: (1) ensuring effective communication between individuals (which would make possible, *inter alia*, a democratic system in which everyone can understand the laws and deliberate in a shared public sphere); (2) ensuring equal socioeconomic opportunities between individuals (especially in employment), irrespective of the language they speak at home; (3) promoting efficiency (the fewer languages, the more efficient the system will be because communication costs will be lower); (4) ensuring mobility within the political community (allowing everyone to move wherever they want without linguistic restrictions or limitations),⁴ and (5) laying the foundations for better social cohesion, thanks to mutual understanding between one other. As one can easily imagine, theorists who uphold purely instrumentalist linguistic regulatory principles often defend either monolingual or quasi-monolingual linguistic policies (with some acceptance of multilingualism, provided there is a common language to promote the five values that we have just set out).

Instead, theorists who argue that language *also* has value in relation to identity (Kymlicka, 1995; Réaume, 2003; Schutter, 2007, 2014; Patten, 2014; Riera-Gil, 2016; Morales-Gálvez, 2017) basically argue that defenders of merely instrumental value are, in practice, favouring the identity values of those languages that, according to them, have greater instrumental value (for communication, for example). By doing so, they would be giving unequal recognition to the identity value of speakers of languages with (supposedly) less instrumental value. These authors thus argue that the identity that people derive from language should be an important factor when regulating the management of languages. And, as one can easily imagine, these arguments are often used to legitimise the protection and promotion of minority and minoritised languages.

These authors often emphasise two related arguments: (1) that of *autonomy*, according to which languages are gateways to particular, diverse cultural contexts that create the conditions through which individuals can make valuable choices in their lives, and (2) that of *dignity or respect*, according to which the institutional treatment given to a language (and that received from third parties) is strictly linked to the treatment given to the speakers who identify with it. This means that if a language is given a higher (institutional) status than another language, the message being delivered is that, symbolically, there are first-class speakers (with more dignity) and second-class speakers.

All of these powerful ideas underpin arguments about how language should be regulated, since they focus on the root of the debate: clarifying what value can be derived from the object in question that one wishes to regulate. Following this debate, we would move on to a second stage in which the question is no longer what the value of that being regulated is, but what regulatory principle should be used to manage it. For example, should it be a principle of equality? Should we offer equal dignity, status or respect to speakers of all languages? Which ones? Or should we instead treat them unequally? How could we combine different

⁴ This point is particularly problematic in plurinational states, where there are diverse views of how many political communities a state includes and what its borders are.

principles? And what reasons would justify this? Does everyone need to have the same communication competences in one or more languages to give effect to the communicative value of languages?

Having outlined the values that, according to the linguistic justice theorists, should be taken into account when deciding how to regulate language, in the following section, which is more empirical, we will identify the main competing arguments within the controversy over the use of languages in the Catalan education system.

2 The debate concerning language and education: the opposing arguments

In this section, we set out a basic outline of the main arguments for and against the linguistic conjunction model in Catalan, which is characterised by a single linguistic model with Catalan as the main language of learning and which favours the conjunction of pupils in the same classrooms irrespective of their languages and other characteristics (Milian & Massana, 1992). To identify the arguments, we will draw on the results of the empirical research by Cetrà (2019, pp. 92-124), which analysed the dominant discourses of political parties and civil society organisations from the inception of the system to the present through documentary analysis and interviews with political actors. However, we will categorise the arguments differently, disentangling forms of reasoning that often appear related but in fact reflect slightly different values and justifications. The objective of this section is not to assess the empirical validity or theoretical strength of the arguments, but simply to identify and present them for analysis in the following section.

Table 2. The main arguments for and against the conjunction system

	FAVOURABLE ARGUMENTS	OPPOSING ARGUMENTS
INSTRUMENTAL ARGUMENTS	Protecting social cohesion Promoting equal opportunities	Defending a constitutional right Reducing equal opportunities Defending the right to one's mother tongue
IDENTITY ARGUMENTS	Defending the national language Correcting a historical injustice	Defending pluralism Against content bias

Source: adaptation based on the evidence collected in Cetrà (2019, pp. 92-124).

2.1 Favourable arguments

The predominant arguments in favour of the system over time have been instrumental. A key discursive element in these arguments is *protecting social cohesion*. This is evidenced by interviews with spokespersons and representatives of Òmnium Cultural, Somescola, Associacions Federades de Famílies d'Alumnes de Catalunya and Plataforma per la Llengua, and political parties such as PSC and IC-V (collected in Cetrà, 2019, pp. 99-106). *Social cohesion* is an ambiguous concept that can be interpreted as preventing social fracturing and segregation, "being a single people," or being all together, which has allowed for broad consensus between explicitly nationalist Catalan parties and others that do not define themselves in that way, such as the PSC (although this party's support for the system has recently waned). According to this argument, of a collective nature, the system makes society cohere by offering linguistic competences in both official languages and counteracts the country's sociolinguistic situation, which is unfavourable to Catalan. This point connects to the historical argument we present below.

The second predominant argument, *promoting equal opportunities*, is also instrumental and is focussed on the individual. This argument claims that the system favours the progress of each person, especially in terms of access to and mobility within the labour market. The system would therefore be particularly beneficial for those whose first language is not Catalan (interview with Muriel Casals, cited in Cetrà, 2019, p. 104). Both arguments share the view of language as a public good. In combination, arguments 1 and 2 tell us that the

system not only helps to decrease socioeconomic inequalities, but also ensures conditions are in place for enhanced coexistence in diversity, where everyone can use their language without the limitations of a context in which a large part of the population does not know Catalan.

A third common argument is not instrumental but instead related to identity: *defending the national language*. This argument may have several formulations, but it often emphasises that Catalan is Catalonia's "own language" (or simply "the language of the country") and should therefore be the main language of learning in the education. This type of argument, which has always been present but has never been dominant within this interpretation, has persisted over time, though it has been losing ground to terms with a more neutral appearance, such as "common language" (Riera-Gil, 2013). This argument reflects a "classic" view (that is widely shared in both nation-states and sub-state nations) of the relationship between language and nation, according to which "normal" political communities have a language that is their own. In its most restricted or "hard" formulation, this argument says that language constitutes the nation and therefore the survival of the language becomes paramount for the very survival of the national community. As Jordi Pujol, a former President of the Generalitat, expressed it in connection with the Catalan case: "there can be a nation without a language, as is the case for Scotland and Ireland ... but in our case, I believe that there is no nation without a language" (cited in Cetrà, 2019, p. 107). Muriel Casals argued that "Catalan is the language of the country and, therefore, should enjoy preferential treatment. I do not know exactly how to explain it, but I see what is happening all around the world. I go to France and see that French enjoys preferential treatment" (cited in Cetrà, 2019, p. 107).

"Softer", more common formulations, present Catalan as the "common language", the "backbone" or the "meeting point" of Catalan society (interviews with Francesc Marco, Plataforma per la Llengua; Teresa Vallverdú, ERC, and Albert Battalla, CiU, cited in Cetrà, 2019, pp. 105-108). There is a clear national dimension in identification of Catalan as a criterion and a tool for integration into the political community. However, traditionally, it is mitigated and intertwined with the first argument concerning social cohesion. From a theoretical point of view, the existence of national communities characterised by language has been justified in various ways. The most important one is that articulated by Will Kymlicka, which we saw in the previous section: according to this author, the survival of the national community is necessary because it gives meaning to the existence of its members and provides a worldview and the possibility of making autonomous choices. However, this philosophical argument is very unlikely to motivate actors to defend the survival of national cultures (after all, it is an argument for protecting *all* national cultures, not only that of their own group and, therefore, can also be used by their political adversaries).

Finally, there is the argument of *correcting a historical injustice*,⁵ according to which Catalan requires positive discrimination mechanisms because it was severely persecuted and repressed. In some formulations, this argument overlaps with that of protecting social cohesion. As Teresa Casals, a spokesperson for Somescola, explained, "When immersion was created, the goal was to be a single people with people who had arrived from elsewhere and did not speak Catalan. [...] Our aim was to be one community" (cited in Cetrà, 2019, p. 103). Although the argument of correcting a historical injustice was very much to the fore in the early days of Spanish democracy and when Catalan institutions were restored in the early 1980s, it has naturally lost ground as Spain has become consolidated as a decentralised democratic State. For this reason, we will not focus directly on this in our analysis in section three.⁶

⁵ We have classified this argument as one concerning identity, due to the usual form in which it is expressed in public debate, with special emphasis on the restoration of historical rights. At the same time, however, it could easily be categorised as an instrumental argument: it is necessary to correct and compensate for unjustifiable, long-standing disadvantages suffered by Catalan speakers, which still endure and which have put the Catalan language in a minoritised situation.

⁶ However, we will focus on it, indirectly, when we discuss whether (or not) it is desirable to guarantee a similar status for Catalan and Spanish, in section 3. As we will see, we will justify the prioritisation of Catalan for reasons other than compensating for a historical injustice. In fact, calling for compensation for a past injustice is always complicated from a normative perspective (one might ask the following questions: who should pay or compensate for the mistakes of the past? Are the people of today responsible for those events? And if not, why should they contribute to compensation?). Precisely because of all these complications and because it is an argument that has been losing ground in public debate as time has gone by, we will not directly deal with the argument of correcting a historical injustice.

2.2 Opposing arguments

Arguments against the system have converged over time (especially since the establishment of the Ciutadans-Ciudadanos political party in 2006) into the argument of *defending a constitutional right*. According to this, the system infringes the right to be educated in Spanish, the language that is official throughout the State. This can be seen in interviews with spokespersons and representatives of Ciutadans-Ciudadanos, Popular Party, Asociación por la Tolerancia y el Bilingüismo, and Convivencia Cívica Catalana (Cetrà, 2019, pp. 109-117). This legalistic argument is logically based on the dominant treatment accorded to the Spanish language by Spain's constitutional framework (article 3.1 of the Spanish Constitution stipulates that Castilian is the official Spanish language of the State and that all Spaniards have the duty to know it and the right to use it). Some political actors say that it is due to this shared element that we are all seen as equal before the law and have the ability to speak on an equal footing (and see one another as equals) in the democratic public sphere. Therefore, an instrumental argument in favour of Spanish (and against the idea of not teaching in Spanish) follows: Spanish is a shared common language that equalises and allows for communication without interference throughout the State.⁷

A second common argument is that *it reduces equal opportunities*. According to this argument, the system goes “against Spanish speakers” because it does not facilitate learning in their mother tongue and consequently damages their educational and socioeconomic opportunities. For example, in its first electoral programme (2006), Ciutadans-Ciudadanos argued that “Compulsory linguistic immersion in Catalonia and the exclusive use of Catalan as the language of learning in classrooms is discriminatory, and that these methodologies harm students in general, who are deprived of the richness of Catalan linguistic diversity; and Spanish speakers in particular, as their linguistic rights are infringed and their academic performance is affected” (cited in Cetrà, 2019, p. 98). In contrast, bilingualism and the equal presence in the classroom of both languages (or three, since some proposals include English) are discursively advocated, that is, to equal the number of teaching hours in each language. One focus of this argument refers to the results of the PISA tests.

A third instrumental argument is *defending the right to one's mother tongue*, which is found in documents such as the Manifesto of Linguistic Tolerance in Catalonia (1994). This has lost ground because the tension between private law and universal law has, in practice, been resolved in favour of the former. This has increased the emphasis on “constitutionalist” arguments. In fact, the emphasis on the mother tongue survives almost exclusively in references made to a 2008 UNESCO document that upholds the right of parents to the free choice of the language in which their children are educated (UNESCO, 2008), and which draws on a previous document on the same subject (UNESCO, 1953). Interestingly, the text referred to is clearly aimed at preventing the extinction of minority languages. Also interestingly, some defenders of the system used the same argument during the initial stages of the system's gestation.

The argument of *defending pluralism*, which is related to the identity value of language, interprets the conjunction system as a paradigmatic example of a broader phenomenon: “monism”, which is excluding and is obsessed with the identity of “nationalism” (an ideology these authors identify only with sub-state nationalism, in this case Catalan). These classical liberal arguments are constant over time and are found, for example, in documents such as the *Manifest dels 2300* [Manifesto of the 2300] (1981), the *Manifest per la Tolerància a Catalunya* [Manifesto for Tolerance in Catalonia] (1994), the initial documents of *Foro Babel* [Babel Forum] (1997) and Ciutadans-Ciudadanos' electoral programmes (Cetrà, 2019, pp. 92-99). They sustain that the conjunction system is a paradigmatic example of nationalism in practice: an idea of linguistic and cultural uniformity aimed at achieving a monolingual Catalonia. In contrast, tolerance and pluralism are discursively defended and, as far as language is concerned, this discourse takes over the explicit defence of the term *bilingualism*.

Finally, the argument *against content bias* supplementarily claims that children are indoctrinated in Catalan nationalism and/or the independence movement through school materials. As Eduardo López-Dóriga, the President of the Asociación por la Tolerancia y el Bilingüismo, argued, “Exercises such as ‘Catalonia, our territory; Europe, our continent; Spain, a territory of Europe. Undetermined article. [...]’ communicate

⁷ As we will point out in section 3, this argument can be interpreted differently from the way it is set out here, which would give rise to a new argument against the conjunction system: the equal treatment argument, which is identity-based.

subliminal messages and give wrong information to students, information that does not follow the Constitution” (Cetrà, 2019, p. 114). Unlike the previous arguments, this is not discussed in the next section, as it has nothing to do with the role that language has in the conjunction system, but instead focuses on an alleged effect of the contents of the teaching material.

To conclude this second section, we would like to highlight two relevant ideas. Firstly, the structure of the arguments for both positions has remained fairly stable over time, with minor emphasis shifts in arguments within each set. Secondly, one can identify a shared tendency to try to “de-ethnicise” legitimising discourses about language (Sanjaume-Calvet & Riera-Gil, 2020), i.e., a tendency to produce reasoning of an instrumental nature or with a legal appearance that plays down the identity aspect. In this regard, it is interesting to note that the efforts of both positions in this direction are often articulated around the same concept (“common language”). Among positions that are against the system, the prevailing role of Spanish in the Spanish constitutional framework makes it easier to articulate arguments with a legal appearance. Among the system’s defenders, we believe that the alliance with political forces that are not explicitly defined as Catalan nationalists favours the discursive twist of portraying Catalonia as socially neutral and “post-national” (Woolard, 2016). The emergence of cracks in this consensus could make explicitly nationalist arguments (the main “competitors” within this set of arguments) to gain ground with respect to the more instrumental arguments (social cohesion and equal opportunities).

3 Reconcilable and irreconcilable points in the debate on the linguistic conjunction system: a guide to the controversy

In this section, we will seek to critically examine the arguments presented, both from the point of view of their theoretical normative strength and the values that underlie them and their empirical consistency. Our ultimate aim is to see whether there are any compatibility gaps or room for reconciliation between the values that underpin these arguments. To that end, we will divide the arguments between those that are essentially instrumental and those that are identity-related, following the theoretical distinction set out in the first section of this article.

3.1 Instrumental arguments

As we have said, there are two instrumental arguments made by the defenders of the conjunction system: guaranteeing equal opportunities and social cohesion, irrespective of the language one speaks. The opponents of the system, instead, use two fundamental arguments against the conjunction system: the basic right of Spaniards to be educated in the Spanish language or “common language”, with the instrumental advantages that arise from this, and the fact that it discourages equal opportunities.

First of all, we will analyse the idea that the conjunction system infringes the basic right of Spaniards to be educated in the Spanish language. We will not go into the legal aspect of the argument, but into the values that underpin this idea. The criticism is based on the fact that Spanish is the common language shared by Spaniards, which makes them equal and allows them to live together. Therefore, the first question we should address is: does the conjunction system really undermine—or is detrimental to—the learning of the Spanish language, understood as a language shared by all Spaniards, which makes everyone equal, and which makes possible the existence of a democratic and common sphere of dialogue among all Spaniards? In the light of the existing data, the idea seems difficult to sustain. The data show that 99.8% of Catalans say they understand Spanish, 99.5% say they speak Spanish, 98.5% read it, and 97.6% write it (Generalitat of Catalonia, 2019). In addition, as Cortés-Colomé (2011) explains, some indicators, such as that of the Consell Superior d’Avaluació del Sistema Educatiu [High Council for Evaluation of the Educational System] (Generalitat of Catalonia), among others, do not appear to point to a worse knowledge of Spanish in terms of reading comprehension (among others) compared with the Spanish State as a whole.⁸ The fact that education is not predominantly in Spanish does not appear to be undermining the values based on which the right to education in Spanish is defended. One might even say that the values used to defend the right to be educated in Spanish do not actually appear to support this right. The available data indicate that, *in the Catalan case, it has been possible*

⁸ For a critical reading of these data, see Branchadell (2019).

to maintain these values that are defended by those who claim the need to have the right to receive education in Spanish without Spanish being the main language of learning precisely because the Catalan system educates students to use Spanish.

Interpreting this argument in an alternative way, one might say, however, that the detractors are not complaining so much about these aspects we have pointed out (which do not appear to be plausible), but are simply complaining because their language, the official language of their country, is excluded from being the main language of learning. However, there must be a *raison d'être* for this idea. It must be based on something. We already know that it does not appear reasonable to base it on the fact that the conjunction system prevents achievement of the goal of making Spanish a language everyone knows. Another possible basis would be that the conjunction system, by excluding Spanish as the main language of learning, does not give proper recognition to speakers who identify with that language; that is, they are treated as second-class citizens in their own country, whose official language is Spanish. However, this argument is not instrumental but is instead identity-related, so we will deal with it in the next section.

Secondly, there is the argument that the system harms educational opportunities for children who have Spanish as their usual language. If we focus on educational opportunities, the data available to us do not appear to corroborate this reasoning. Several empirical studies (Serra, 1997; Ferrer, Castel & Valiente, 2009, p. 211; Ferrer et al., 2011; Arnau, 2011; Villas, 2011a) have shown that the greatest influence on educational success or failure is not the language of origin, but the socioeconomic background of the child's family. In fact, the language of origin does not appear to have a marked influence; instead, the best predictor of educational success is their family's socioeconomic status. In short, a Spanish-speaking child who comes from a family with a high socioeconomic status appears to have the same opportunities for educational success within the Catalan education system as a Catalan-speaking child with the same status.

Thirdly, there is one of the essentially instrumental arguments used by those who defend the system: the conjunction system guarantees equal opportunities for Catalan children. By ensuring learning and competence in both languages through the conjunction system, they enjoy the same life opportunities in adulthood, especially in the workplace.⁹ Leaving aside the fact that this argument is hard to sustain if we take into account the differences in socioeconomic background that exist in Catalan society, it may have some validity in the linguistic field. Since everyone (ideally) achieves similar levels of linguistic competence, and (again, ideally) leaving aside socioeconomic differences, it would be plausible to claim that everyone could have access to any job regardless of their language of origin. Language would therefore no longer be a barrier because everyone would complete compulsory education with competence in both languages.¹⁰

Fourthly, there is the argument that the system generates greater social cohesion, in the sense that it creates a good framework of linguistic coexistence between speakers of both languages. From an empirical point of view, there appears to be no consensus on whether multicultural (or specifically multilingual) policies create better social cohesion.¹¹ In Catalonia, it does appear to be the case that the system enjoys broad political support,¹² especially if we consider that electoral support for political parties that support the conjunction system (with different nuances between them) has been high over time. In fact, the best recent election result for opponents of the system was in the Catalan elections in 2017, with only 40 deputies (36 for Ciutadans and 4 for the Popular Party) out of 135. Apart from the political support, according to the data, the linguistic competences acquired at school would enable everyone to make use of the language they believe necessary in virtually all areas of life. It is difficult to say whether this amounts to the existence of social cohesion, but

9 For empirical research regarding this, see Di Paolo & Raymond (2012), Caminal (2016), Cappellari & Di Paolo (2018) and Di Paolo & Caminal (2019).

10 In fact, this entire idea would be valid in relation to state and state-assisted schools, which are the ones that have an obligation to apply the language conjunction system. Private or international schools would be a separate case (though relatively insignificant, due to the small proportion of students out of the total).

11 For empirical arguments in favour of this, see Levrau & Loobuyck (2013). However, as we have said, there is no consensus.

12 There is not much data on social support for the conjunction model. One exception is a survey published by *La Vanguardia* (Castro, 2013), in which 81 per cent of Catalan people said they support the system. This lack of data is actually criticised by some academics such as Miley (2006), who claims that Catalans are not as pro-system as the political elites, which is why they never ask them about it in opinion polls. Branchadell (2019) also provides some more data.

it would appear to create a good framework of basic coexistence between speakers of the different languages within the territory in question.¹³

Moreover, we believe that, from a theoretical point of view, this argument would also suggest something else: that the conjunction model helps create a public sphere of dialogue and democracy shared by Catalans. This argument appears to be based on a similar idea to the previous point: with almost everyone competent in both languages, it is possible for everyone to dialogue, offer arguments, understand and respond to what others say. This argument, then, would appear to have some weight. A general analysis of the various surveys on language use conducted by the Generalitat Catalonia (Generalitat of Catalonia, 2019)¹⁴ shows that the system has been achieving the goal of making more and more people competent in both languages.¹⁵ This makes it possible to share a common sphere of dialogue in which virtually everyone can read the press, discuss about politics or listen to the radio in both languages. This ideal would appear to be not only empirically verifiable but also desirable from a normative perspective: it makes it possible to have a democracy in which everyone has the opportunity to dialogue and understand each other (Morales-Gálvez, 2017).¹⁶

To sum up, we consider that the two instrumental arguments against the conjunction system (infringement of the right to education in the official language, Spanish, and equal educational opportunities for children) appear to be empirically unfounded. At the same time, however, it would be necessary to consider a part of the substance of the matter being expressed by the argument of equal educational opportunities for all: the opportunities for educational success for some Spanish-speaking students due to socioeconomic (rather than linguistic) reasons, appear to be lower than those for Catalan speakers.¹⁷ Although the key aspect of the issue is not purely linguistic, defenders of the system should probably take this aspect of the argument more into account to allow the principles that they defend regarding equal life and work opportunities and social cohesion.¹⁸

3.2 Identity arguments

There are three identity arguments related to the debate concerning the linguistic conjunction system. The system's detractors argue that this system is contrary to pluralism and equal treatment or recognition of languages, while some of those in favour argue that the system ensures that Catalan, Catalonia's own language and the cornerstone of the Catalan national community, can continue to exist.

As we have said, detractors of the conjunction system use two identity-related arguments.¹⁹ The first has to do with pluralism. In contrast to the alleged "monism" of the conjunction system and its expected uniformising character, they call for a bilingual system. This argument has two possible interpretations and grounds. On the one hand, the idea that institutions have an obligation to recognise social plurality, including linguistic

13 In fact, some might say that this framework is not created strongly enough, because although Catalan is the main language of learning and the data have tended to show that everyone has competence in both languages, there is still a (decreasing) part of the Catalan population that has no basic competence in Catalan, making it difficult for Catalan-speaking people to express themselves in Catalan whenever they wish to do so in the Principality of Catalonia.

14 See the surveys from 2003, 2008, 2013 and 2018: https://llengua.gencat.cat/ca/serveis/dades_i_estudis/poblacio/Enquesta-EULP/.

15 For example, as the latest Language Use in Catalonia Survey (Generalitat of Catalonia, 2019) shows, the percentage of people who understand Catalan has risen from 79.8% in 1981 to 94.4% in 2018. The same is the case, albeit to a lesser extent, for those who know how to speak (from 64% in 1986 to 85.5% in 2018), read (from 60.5% in 1986 to 81.2% in 2018) and write in Catalan (from 31.5% in 1986 to 65.3% in 2018).

16 Some academics set certain limitations on this by stating that, although we may be competent in the same languages, not everyone's voice is heard and valued equally in public debates, because of accent-related prejudices (Peled & Bonotti, 2016, 2019), for example. Although we share this interpretation, we will not address it in this paper, as it goes far beyond the focus of this study.

17 The data are even more forceful when we consider students who do not have level L1 in Catalan or Spanish. In this case, the socioeconomic factor remains crucial.

18 In fact, the Government of Catalonia has already prepared documents and plans setting out this problem. Recently, the document titled "Model lingüístic del sistema educatiu de Catalunya" [Linguistic Model of the Education System in Catalonia] (Generalitat of Catalonia, 2018) and, more recently, the "Pla de llengua i cohesió social" [Language and Social Cohesion Plan] (Generalitat of Catalonia, 2004).

19 In fact, paradoxically, from a normative perspective, their strongest arguments are the most well-founded, despite the fact that it is often emphasised in public debate that the promotion of Spanish has more to do with instrumental reasons than identity.

pluralism. However, this idea has more to do with the argument of equal treatment, which we will address later. On the other hand, another interpretation is that cultural and linguistic pluralism would offer a wider range of options to choose from, more autonomy, than a uniformising system. They thus call for a bilingual school system in which both languages (or three, including English) are languages of learning in similar percentages (symmetrical bilingualism). The normative force of this argument is undoubtedly substantive. *A priori*, pluralism would appear to be a more than reasonable principle to manage linguistic diversity, as it would provide children with access to a richer and more plural cultural universe (societal culture, in the words of Kymlicka, 1995) and thus greater capacity to choose.

This argument clearly contrasts with the argument justifying the conjunction system on Catalan being Catalonia's own language, a defining element of Catalan national identity. Catalan should therefore persist as a differentiating and identifying element of the Catalan culture. From a normative point of view, we might consider that the maintenance of the national community, and the language as one of its essential elements, is necessary because it gives meaning to individuals' decisions.

A priori, it would appear that there is a strong incompatibility between the two ideas. If one interprets the nationalist argument in defence of the conjunction system in a "hard" sense, the incompatibility is obvious. In other words, if it is understood that only Catalan can define the national community, that it is the only language that is its own and offers valuable life horizons to its members, it is clear that it cannot be compatible with the other argument. This argument presents obvious feasibility problems in a context such as the Catalan one, in which a majority of citizens currently speak Spanish as their first language. However, above all, from a theoretical point of view, this argument is very difficult to sustain and justify from a normative point of view. Culture is not static. It changes and is modified over time. It changes and is modified because it is internally diverse. Because there are citizens with different ideas and conceptions of good, who participate in and modify shared norms and values. Considering that this is not desirable would mean that the elements that define a culture have been pre-politically defined (outside of community dialogue and the freedom of its members) and that these defining elements cannot be modified. What freedom would then remain?

Instead, a "softer" or laxer interpretation of the national language argument provides room for compatibility. Seeking the survival and use of Catalan as a language of Catalonia and a cornerstone of Catalan culture is not incompatible with the inclusion of Spanish, or other languages, in this equation. As long as the use, survival and vitality of Catalan is guaranteed, there is no theoretical contradiction in Spanish and other languages playing a role in the cultural configuration of the community. The point at which there would be disagreement is what role each language should have. In fact, Cetrà (2019) explains the linguistic controversy in Catalonia as a competition for the linguistic prevalence of two competing national projects, Catalan and Spanish, each with their own main language.

When we ask ourselves what role each language should play, an important question that we should ask ourselves is how the objective of preserving a societal culture (Kymlicka, 1995, 2001) that offers valuable and diverse choices to Catalans can best be achieved theoretically. *A priori*, equal treatment would appear to be the most reasonable option to achieve this. If the equal presence of both languages in classrooms ensures the vitality and use of both languages and maintenance of their speakers' autonomy, why should Catalan be given differential treatment? At the same time, however, we know two things. On the one hand, we know that it is not desirable to treat two unequal things equally. Treating a person who does not have full physical capabilities (for example, because they have a bone disease) the same as one who does would not seem fair. Inequalities need to be offset when we are not responsible for them, and both our linguistic affiliation and the position that have the languages we identify with in the world are beyond our individual scope and responsibility (De Schutter & Ypi, 2011). In addition, sociolinguistics provides empirical evidence of people's linguistic behaviour. For example, Laponce (2001, pp. 188-189) tells us that when two languages coexist peacefully, one of the two (usually the dominant one) tends to replace the other. In a very similar direction, but with a more theoretical rather than an empirical approach, Van Parijs (2011) comes to similar conclusions. Catalan sociolinguistics has also performed considerable work on this topic (Boix Fuster & Vila Moreno, 1998). Thus, purely symmetrical treatment could, contrary to what is being sought, be counterproductive in

maintaining pluralism, as it could lead to less vitality and decreased use of Catalan and, ultimately, reduce the valuable choices available to its speakers.²⁰

It would therefore appear that a pluralist system with asymmetrical bilingualism (i.e. with Catalan preponderance, while guaranteeing the presence of Spanish) would be the most effective way to reconcile the two arguments.²¹ At the same time, that would mean *giving up two things: on the one hand, the idea of purely symmetrical bilingualism supported by critics of the systems and, on the other hand, the idea that Catalan alone is Catalonia's own language²² and defines Catalan culture, as some defenders of the system sustain*

Finally, there is an interpretation of the legalistic argument employed by detractors of the conjunction system, based on the idea that the model does not offer equal recognition or status to both languages. In particular, this is the idea that the conjunction system does not offer the institutional recognition that the Spanish language deserves as the official language of the State. As we explained earlier, the recognition that a language receives from the administration can be interpreted as a recognition of its status and, indirectly, of its speakers. Failure to do so could be seen as granting inferior status to certain languages by public institutions, which may be perceived as unfair. In this sense, detractors of the conjunction system might say that both languages should be given equal recognition, with equal dignity, within the conjunction system. National identity plays no less of a role in this argument than in others, as Cetrà points out (2019). Therefore, not giving Spanish the deserved treatment and dignity by the institutions would be interpreted as an injustice towards speakers who identify with this language.²³

The normative weight of this argument is no less. People, in general, tend to want to be treated with equal dignity and respect, and since our languages are an element with which we identify intimately and from which we derive significant value, we also want them to be treated with that respect. *A priori*, giving them a different status would not appear to be an interesting normative idea, since it could be interpreted as unequal treatment of their speakers' dignity.

Therefore, moving away from offering equal recognition or status to both languages, if it were acceptable, would require strong justification by institutions. Once again, this is a question similar to that in the previous point. Is it fair to treat two things (in this case Catalan speakers and Spanish speakers) that are clearly unequal in the same way? As Morales-Gálvez (2017) and De Schutter (2017) explain by entering into a dialogue with Patten (2014), the concept of equal treatment or recognition can be interpreted in several ways. Patten argues that equal treatment of two languages must be directly proportional to that of their number of speakers. He argues for *per capita* distribution of resources for each language, where the percentage of resources to be received by each linguistic group should be similar to the percentage of the population as a whole. If a group represents 15% of the total population, it should receive 15% of the resources. De Schutter (2017), on the other hand, argues that the most vulnerable linguistic groups should be provided with resources that would allow them to have services similar to those received by the largest groups (even if that means they receive more resources *per capita* than the groups with the more speakers). Unlike these two models, detractors of the conjunction system argue that both linguistic groups should be treated, we might say, symmetrically,

20 [Davidaviçiūtė](#) (2020, p. 8) goes even further and links the loss of cultural heritage with decreased normative agency. In other words, the (gradual) loss of the ability to independently choose a life that we believe is worth living.

21 In fact, there are some empirical studies that evaluate knowledge of Catalan by Spanish-speaking students, comparing a group of children schooled in Catalan with a group educated in Spanish. They show that students enrolled in programmes mainly in Catalan know significantly more Catalan than the other group. See Serra (1997) and Vila (2011b).

22 This assertion does not refer to the legal concept of *own language*, in the Catalan legal system, but instead to a theoretical and normative notion from the perspective of political theory. How this could be translated from legal and public policy viewpoints is an issue that we will not address in this paper, although it is clear to us that not only Catalan should (necessarily) have a presence in the education system.

23 A reasonable response to this argument, which we deal with in depth here, is whether it makes much sense to accept this argument in isolation, when so many other spaces (institutional and private) prioritise or impose Spanish. They therefore do not offer equal treatment. Indeed, the education system (and Catalan institutions in general) is the only place where Catalan has preferential treatment, precisely in order to counteract the fact that it has much less recognition in many other areas (including Spanish institutions). We are aware of this and believe that it would be a valid argument in a general linguistic debate. However, for the sake of analytical clarity, in this paper we will focus only on the education system.

regardless of other considerations. According to them, the results of this would not be so important, provided both languages had a similar status in the education process.²⁴

This presentation allows us to understand that the principle of equal treatment may be subject to various interpretations. In fact, and for the reasons set out when we dealt with the pluralism argument, treating two unequal things equally can lead to results that, *a priori*, would not be desirable. Offering equal status to Catalan and Spanish in education (interpreted as offering education services, broadly speaking, in a similar percentage in both languages) could lead to scenarios in which Catalan speakers, as speakers of a language in a vulnerable situation, would end up in a disadvantaged position. If this were to happen, the principle of equal treatment (as detractors of the system understand it) could be said to be guaranteed, but at the same time other values could be undermined, such as instrumental principles (equal opportunities, better social coexistence or a sphere of shared dialogue, all due to the bilingualisation of the population) or achievement of the value of autonomy (since Catalan speakers could gradually lose valuable choices as their language and cultural context declines). It could even be argued that this could make it difficult for Catalan speakers to make normal use of their language on a daily basis, and that they might end up suffering from a loss of equal recognition not by the institutions but by their own fellow citizens (if competence in Catalan is not guaranteed at the end of education).

Therefore, interpreting equal treatment in a symmetrical sense during the education process, without concern for the outcomes, would be hard to reconcile with the positions of those who defend the conjunction system. If, on the other hand, equal treatment is interpreted as *achieving similar status for both languages at the end of education*, there would not be so many compatibility issues. It would therefore appear that the position defended by De Schutter (2017), in which equal treatment is justified by the fact that unequal resources are invested in unequal situations to achieve similar results, would be the most attractive, and it would not contradict in any way the idea that speakers from both groups are being treated with the same respect.²⁵

Therefore, the fact that Catalan enjoys a preferential status so that everyone (especially Spanish speakers) has similar linguistic competences²⁶ would seem to be perfectly justifiable and compatible with the ideal of equal treatment, provided that Spanish is also given sufficient recognition within the educational system and everyone has good competences in Spanish upon completion of compulsory education.²⁷

4 Conclusions: modest prospects for rapprochement

We would like to conclude this article by stressing that, in our view and on the basis of the reasoning set out above, there are some prospects for rapprochement between the opposing arguments that would make it possible to maintain the current model. This is not to say that the following considerations make it possible to resolve a long-term controversy in which motivations are not always based on principles but instead on interests and identity. We are not naive. Our aim is to identify possible conceptual meeting points between

24 There is a long-standing debate in political theory as to whether justice requires fair processes to ensure equal opportunities, regardless of the outcome of such processes, or whether the impact of such processes needs to be taken into account (see, for example, Patten, 2014). This debate also takes place in relation to the way languages and their speakers should be treated. However, for reasons of space we will not go into this in depth.

25 This point (the same as when we discussed the arguments on pluralisms) could be related to the argument of compensation for a historical injustice suffered by Catalan speakers. Here, however, we deal with it without including the historical perspective. In fact, as we explained in section 2, one can call for policies of positive discrimination in favour of Catalan without necessarily referring to historical injustices.

26 As Vila (2011b) argues, it would appear that a system that prioritises Catalan would be more useful in making Spanish speakers more fluent in this language than another system in which there was no such prioritisation.

27 One of the paper's reviewers raised an important question about the territorial and linguistic heterogeneity of Catalonia: is our conclusion valid anywhere in the Principality of Catalonia regardless of the number of Catalan speakers? This is a really complex issue and one that we cannot address in depth in this paper. However, we would like to set out two ideas. On the one hand, the argument we are making is ultimately general in nature. It is thus perfectly adaptable to the reality of different contexts. Moreover, we also think it appropriate to point out that the pre-eminence of Spanish in many areas of Catalans' everyday life is very high, even in areas with a clear majority of Catalan speakers. For this reason, we believe that in such cases, a large part of the reasoning that leads to justifying Catalan's preferential role in schools would certainly remain valid.

the two argumentative frameworks and to suggest ways to renew the arguments as part of the process. These are as follows:

Instrumental arguments

- The instrumental arguments used by the defenders of the conjunction system appear to be compatible with some of the instrumental principles defended by its detractors, provided that the system guarantees good competence in Spanish and equal educational opportunities for all children. Today, this appears to be the case, as the system has guaranteed the bilingualisation of the population.
- If one firmly believes in the value of equal opportunities, one should take into account the legitimate concern of the system's detractors when they criticise the fact that Spanish speakers tend to achieve worse educational outcomes, even if we know that the cause of the problem is not language but socioeconomic status. Indeed, as Riera-Gil (2021) explains, there are already government documents that take this into consideration. However, as far as public discourse is concerned, the defenders of the conjunction system could place greater emphasis on incorporating this concern into their discursive framework.

Identity arguments

- It seems that the argument on pluralism claimed by the detractors of the conjunction system does not fit at all well with the ideas of those who defend a "hard" interpretation of Catalan as the only language of learning, based on the idea that it is Catalonia's own language that defines Catalan national culture. On the contrary, a "softer" interpretation, in which Catalan is a fundamental feature of the Catalan cultural community, while accepting that it is plural, with diverse linguistic realities that can also be typical of Catalan culture, could be compatible with the pluralist idea and its ultimate value: that of offering valuable choices to individuals. And, also with regard to the argument on pluralism, it would be desirable for critics of the system to recognise that this system is embedded in a general context of Catalan-Spanish relations in which the presence of Catalan is much lower and, therefore, a sincere defence of pluralist positions should lead to a defence of a more balanced presence between languages in all areas (not just in the education system).
- The way in which the recognition or equal status of languages is interpreted will influence the degree of compatibility of this principle with the arguments in favour of the conjunction system. If symmetrical recognition during education is defended (regardless of the results), it would be difficult to reconcile it with the arguments made by the defenders of the conjunction system. If, on the other hand, this principle is interpreted in an alternative way, in which the aim is to make educational outcomes equal (and thus to achieve similar linguistic competences in both languages at the end of education), then there might be room for compatibility.

The two points above could imply asymmetrical bilingualism, giving preference to the vulnerable language. If the argument on pluralism is interpreted only as absolutely symmetrical treatment between the two languages, it could be difficult to reconcile this with the positions taken by the defenders of the conjunction system and would possibly also be inconsistent with the ultimate value defended by pluralism: that of guaranteeing autonomous choices in rich and diverse cultural contexts (since treating Catalan and Spanish symmetrically might undermine the vitality of the former). At the same time, the fact that Catalan enjoys preferential treatment in order to achieve the desired results (general and effective bilingualisation, especially in favour of learning Catalan) should not be a problem for the principle of equal treatment, provided that Spanish has a sufficient role (or recognition) in education and effective competence in this language is achieved by students.

By way of conclusion, and in relation to the defenders of the system, this article modestly proposes that some of the interpretations of the principles we have set out in this paper be adopted or integrated in their discourse.²⁸ These are as follows: equal opportunities, social cohesion/coexistence, having a shared public sphere, equal treatment of both languages (meaning equal outcomes in linguistic competence with a sufficient presence of both languages in education) and defending cultural pluralism as a tool to promote individuals'

28 Although, as mentioned above, some of them have already been partially integrated into documents approved by the Government of Catalonia. See Government of Catalonia (2004, 2018).

life choices. Renewing the arguments employed by considering some of these elements could help to allow the system to continue with a similar outline to the current one and, insofar as possible, obtain the consent of some of its detractors.

That would probably mean two things. Firstly, to give less prominence to arguments concerning the concept of Catalonia's own language and the discursive adoption and reinterpretation of the concept of bilingualism by prioritising Catalan. Secondly, and at the same time, to guarantee that Spanish is sufficiently present to ensure cultural pluralism, the equal status of both languages in education, and that everyone has similar linguistic competences. This, of course, is not to overlook the fact that the education system is not isolated from other areas in which Catalan speakers are the ones who suffer the most. For example, it would be difficult to argue that both languages are treated equally in the audiovisual market. Despite the focus we have placed on the education system, it is necessary to take these factors into account in the general debate on Catalan and Spanish linguistic models.

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